

Missouri River Rated Endangered Again

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WASHINGTON -- Accommodating barges that carry Midwestern grain to the Gulf is pushing Missouri River fish and birds to the brink of extinction, an environmental group said in naming the "Big Muddy" America's most-threatened waterway.

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark would fail to recognize the river whose meandering channels and teeming banks they explored nearly two centuries ago, American Rivers said in its annual survey of waterways in jeopardy.

Dams and channels built for navigation and hydropower have made it straighter, shorter, narrower and deeper, eliminating islands and sandbars for nesting and shallow breeding habitat for fish.

"Managing the Missouri River only for a tiny amount of barge traffic is bad environmental policy and just plain bad economic policy," said Rebecca Wodder, the group's president.

Its top choice was no surprise. Environmental and recreation advocates are battling agriculture and shipping industries over proposed changes in water flow intended to benefit fish and wildlife, returning the river to a more natural spring surge and lower summer flow.

Last summer, the controversy brought the U.S. Senate to a standstill, resulting in President Clinton's veto of a \$23.6 billion energy and water spending bill.

This summer, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will issue a new river management plan that is expected to adopt the controversial "spring rise" recommendations by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Citing U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates, the group said Missouri River barges carry less than one percent of the grain harvested on the plains, benefiting the economy by about \$6.9 million a year.

Supporters of the flow changes argue there are far bigger economic benefits in boating, fishing, hunting, camping, hiking and other forms of recreation -- all of which would be enhanced by the changes.

On average, the 735 miles of lower Missouri River hold just one barge tow per day, the group said, citing corps estimates.

"I wouldn't quibble with their numbers," said Paul Johnston, a spokesman for the corps' Northwestern Division in Omaha. "But what gets lost here is that it's not up to the Corps of Engineers to stop supporting navigation. It's an authorized purpose, along with all the other purposes Congress authorized. It isn't a bunch of guys sitting around a table saying, 'Let's build some dams and straighten this thing out.'"

Release of the dam reform plan will be followed by six months of hearings and workshops throughout the Missouri River basin, which includes parts of Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas and Missouri.

A shipping industry group based in St. Louis, where the 2,500-mile Missouri empties into the Mississippi River, dismissed American Rivers' list as an annual public-relations stunt.

"Too bad it's not based on science," said Chris Brescia, president of the Midwest Area River Coalition. Scientists from Missouri state agencies insist their own historical data contradicts the conclusions of the federal Fish and Wildlife Service.

Opponents of the changes argue that there are a host of ways to protect the threatened and endangered species -- the least tern, piping plover and pallid sturgeon. For example, federal and state authorities have in recent years acquired about 87,000 acres of Missouri River floodplain to restore and conserve wildlife habitat.

"We can always do a better job of improving the river habitat, and I have introduced federal legislation to do just that," said Republican U.S. Sen. Kit Bond, a Missourian who has positioned himself as a major obstacle to flow-change proponents.